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SUBJECT: POLICE CORRUPTION IN SAN MIGUEL

REF: A. SAN SALVADOR 1248

[1](#)B. SAN SALVADOR 1485

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Three current and former members of El Salvador's National Civilian Police (PNC) were arrested on July 29 and charged with carrying out a contract killing. Several local businessmen have also been implicated in what press reports describe as an extortion, racketeering and assassination network operating in the eastern Salvadoran city of San Miguel. To complicate matters further, ongoing press speculation alleges a link between the criminal network and the populist mayor of the city of San Miguel. End summary.

Murder for Hire?

[1](#)2. (U) On July 29 Nelson Arriaza Delgado, a police sergeant from the criminal investigations unit of the National Civilian Police (PNC) in San Miguel was arrested and charged with murder for his alleged role in the assassination of an individual purported to have connections to street gangs operating in Nueva Sparta, a municipality in the nearby department of La Union. Arriaza and two former policemen are accused of being part of an organized network of killers for hire which is suspected of involvement in upwards of 15 unsolved killings.

[1](#)3. (U) On August 1 PNC Director Rodrigo Avila stated that that several San Miguel businessmen were under investigation for "recruiting" corrupt police officers into a network engaged in the murder of criminals and gang members. In an interview with local paper Diario de Hoy, Avila compared the San Miguel network to the notorious "Sombra Negra" ('black shadow'), a right-wing death squad that targeted gang members and criminals during the Salvadoran civil war. Avila alleged that the San Miguel group was not only involved in what he referred to as "social cleansing," but also complicit in murder and intimidation in support of their legitimate business interests, as well as smuggling, extortion, and drug and human trafficking. (Comment: The Sombra Negra was one of the most notorious right-wing death squads of the civil war era. Unless Avila has far more serious information regarding the activities of the San Miguel group which he has yet to make public, the comments he made to the press on August 1 are almost certainly overblown. End comment).

Politics Unusual

[1](#)4. (SBU) San Miguel, El Salvador's third largest city, is situated in the far eastern part of the country and is an important agricultural and industrial center. As such, San Miguel's mayor has a certain level of national prominence. To complicate matters further, San Miguel's mayor, Wilfredo

"Will" Salgado, is himself a controversial figure. Salgado once described the Sombra Negra as a "necessary evil" and is alleged to have been involved in human and arms trafficking in the past, though never directly implicated. The mayor, often described as a populist with "authoritarian tendencies" was expelled from the National Conciliation Party (PCN) earlier this year (reftel A), and has declared himself a Presidential candidate in the 2009 elections (Comment: Salgado is not considered to have any reasonable chance of garnering sufficient support for a realistic presidential bid, though his presence in the race could alter the landscape enough to have both major parties concerned. End comment) Salgado has distanced himself from this case and its investigation, dismissing any connection to the alleged criminals saying only that he is a supporter of the police "from afar." Unsubstantiated media speculation has linked ARENA and members of the PNC with a desire to use the San Miguel events to further discredit Salgado.

¶5. (U) The Ministry of Public Security and the PNC have been quick to label this an isolated incident rather than evidence of a widespread problem within the PNC. The PNC is widely regarded as a reputable and 'clean' police force, in marked contrast to the police forces of some other Central American countries. The opposition FMLN, which has used recent arrests in Suchitoto to criticize ARENA's human rights record (reftel B), has attempted to use this case as an example of the corruption of the PNC and by extension the ruling ARENA party. This allegation has by and large been met with both media and public skepticism.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) Accusations of corruption are particularly damaging to the PNC. The institution has been working hard to establish its bona fides with a Salvadoran population increasingly frustrated by corruption and the inability of the central government to gain the upper hand against street gangs and other violent criminals. Allegations of death squads and extra-judicial killings harken back to the darkest days of the Salvadoran civil war, and risk setting in motion further political polarization over public safety and crime control policy. Moreover, the recent arrests in Suchitoto have raised the political temperature and placed the ARENA government on the defensive against FMLN (and U.S. NGO) charges of backsliding on human rights. Though by all appearances the indicted police officers were motivated by corruption and greed rather than an overtly political or ideological agenda, further political ramifications could ensue from the unfolding San Miguel PNC investigations. End Comment.
Butler